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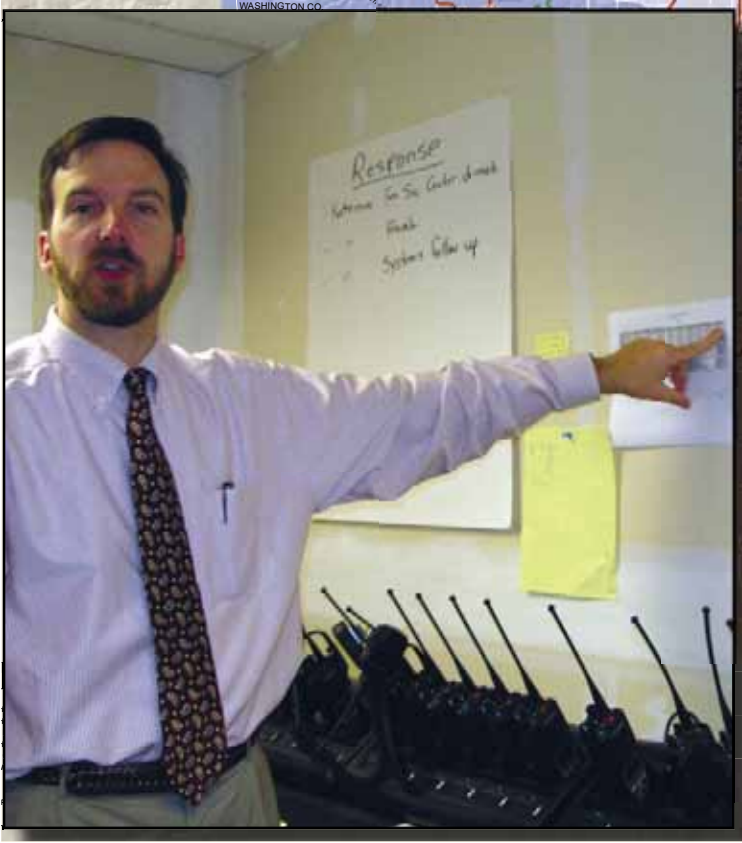
Master of Disaster: An interview with Multnomah County's Director of Emergency Management

Merilee Karr

EMERGENCY ROUTES



Tom Simpson,
Director of Emergency Management for Multnomah County.
Emergency route map courtesy of Multnomah County.

MASTER OF DISASTER

Tom Simpson has your back. Your bridges may be another story.

Interview and Photographs by Merilee Karr

Since 2003, Tom Simpson has had one of the most high stress jobs in Oregon. He is Director of Emergency Management for Multnomah County. At a time when everyone in the Portland region has concerns about terrorism and natural disasters and knows from recent examples exactly how the response to emergency situations can go wrong and cost needless loss of life and treasure, Simpson's job is to prepare the most populous county in the state for any catastrophe. Metroscape® *asked Merilee Karr, MD, to discuss with him how he does that, how well we are prepared, and what the obstacles are. The entire transcript is available at: www.pdx.edu/ims/. They spoke at the Crisis Information Center in the basement of the Multnomah County building at the east end of the Morrison Bridge, on October 25, 2005 beginning with a conversation about crisis communications.*

Q: *Tell me about communications signals. Will we be able to talk to each other in an emergency*?

A: Yes. Everybody can talk to everybody.

Q: *How?*

A: If you look at the region, Clark County has its own 911 system. So does Washington County, and Multnomah, and Columbia and Clackamas. . . . Lake Oswego has its own 911 system . . . so you have six. Those six areas all have different frequency templates. Each of these radios, all lined up in their chargers, is programmed with radio frequencies, in the 800 megahertz band. If you look at this radio, it'll tell you what you're looking at: 'Multnomah County Sheriff's Dispatch.' And here's Multnomah County dispatch.

Q: *So you can call them.*

A: On this radio, you're just talking to this county sheriff in their particular part of the county . . . But, what every radio template also has is Metro A, B, and C. All six areas, whatever radio you pick up, they're all going to have Metro A, B, and C. So if I'm a sheriff's deputy, and I go to an incident where I have to cross into Clark County, Washington, on a chase or a mutual aid response, the dispatcher'll say 'This operation's on Metro A.' So you flip your radio over to Metro A, and then you can talk to Clark County. For example we can say, for this exercise, for this incident, we want everybody talking on Metro A. And the dispatcher will clear everybody on Metro A. That's common dispatch, interoperability. In a situation, all the emergency operations centers will be able to talk to each other.

We have a Mobile Command Vehicle with all these channels set up in the back. It's parked out in Gresham in a secure site. We had to choose between putting it in a building that may fall over in a really bad earthquake, or leaving it outside so it's safe during an earthquake—but all the vandals will rip it off. . . . We were going to put antennas for all these radios on the roof of this building. Then we found out that to wire them into this basement was astronomically expensive, so we said, Time Out, let's see if there's a technology solution. Which there is. You know Vonage?

Q: *Remind me.*

A: Voice Over IP. It's using the Internet to talk on the phone.

Q: *Are you doing that here?*

A: Here's what we're doing. Actually, during Katrina, the mayor of New Orleans and, I think, his command staff, were holed up in the Hyatt. Hurricane goes whippin' through. Knocks out everything. . . . But almost right away the power comes back on, cuz they've got an emergency generator at the Hyatt. But their cell phones are out because the storm knocked down all the towers. The police radios are out. That wouldn't happen here. We've got incredible redundancy built into the system. They could knock out a whole ton of our repeaters and the thing would still work. It's very, very good.

But down there, based on geography and everything, they were out of luck. Then their IT director said, You know, I just set up a Vonage account. And he looked around, and right there on the wall was an Internet plug. So he plugged his laptop into it, and sure enough, he got an Internet signal. So the cell phones are out, the land lines are out, the police radios are out, but he got an Internet connection. Logged in, got on his Vonage account, he has a phone. Through Internet protocol.

Q: *To anyone else on the Internet.*

A: Nope—to any phone. Any phone. He can call a cell phone, he can call a land line, it's just like a phone. It's using your computer, instead of a phone, as your device. So your device becomes your computer. That's how VOIP—Voice-Over Internet Protocol—works.

Q: *How can he call a cell phone if the towers are down? How does the signal get to the phone?*

A: Well it may not get to a particular phone if the tower's down. But he can call any device that has a phone number. And we find also with cell phones, that while services may be hammered in one area, sometimes you can get an outside line.

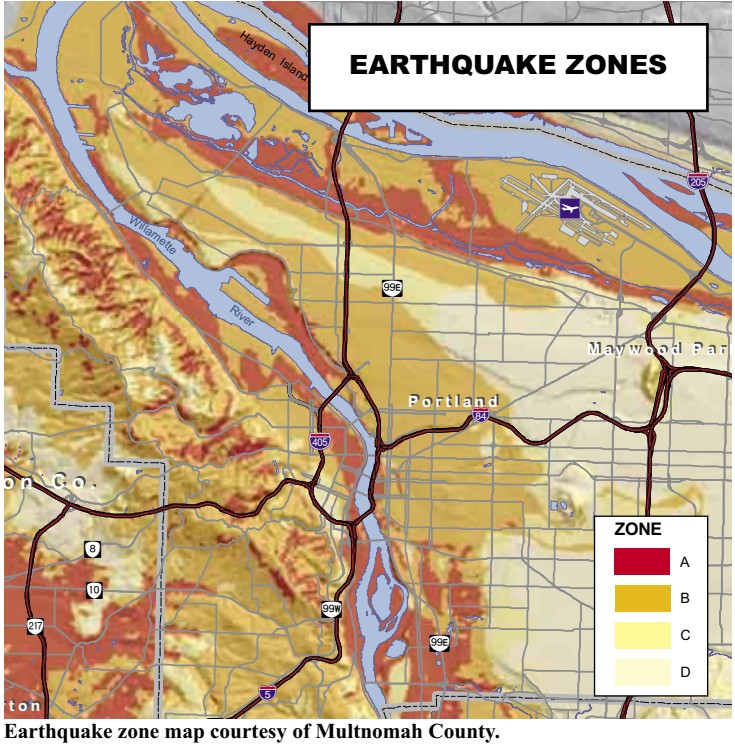
So here's what the technology does. These radios were about the same price it was going to be to run the antennas from the roof to here. I can take them back out to Gresham where I've already got antennas and hook them up. I can buy a box. The radios plug into the box, and it turns their radio signal into an IP signal. Internet protocol signal. As long as the signal coming from that radio is connected to the Internet, then I can listen to that signal on the Internet. So I don't have to worry about teaching people how to use radios. All they have to learn how to use is a piece of software, which is pretty simple. And these guys from a Portland group (Mountain Wave Communications, a volunteer organization that provides communicataion for search and rescue operations), they map a particular radio to another radio. So those 800-megahertz radios out there, I can map that radio signal right to this one. On this radio, I can't listen to any of those bands. But they just solved that problem with software. It came in as an 800-megahertz signal, it came out as this signal, and I can listen to it. So I can map to anything. They actually had an 800-megahertz going to a phone, a cell phone. That's incredible. Because it basically eliminates the interconnectivity problem. It means during an incident, everybody can talk to everybody.

Q: *What are we going to regret the morning after an earthquake, or an attack, not having done?*

A: That's a really good question. Bridges are obvious. What people don't realize is, next time you're driving along, pay attention to bridges. Not the ones over the river. The ones over—the overpasses, the off ramps, the things going over or under something else.

Q: *There's millions of those.*

A: Presto. How many of those will drop during an earthquake? Think of Southeast Powell, right



Earthquake zone map courtesy of Multnomah County.

there at 17th. Goes underneath there. Railroad. Bridge. Crunch. Will that fall? Think of Interstate 205. Interstate 84. All the bridges going over I-405 through downtown Portland. How many of those will still be left up afterwards, and what will that do to our emergency vehicles trying to get from point A to point B? So one of the things we've done is recognize that that is a likely weak spot, and put together emergency transportation routes. The ETR plan is regional. It says, well, bang, something terrible happens. Here's your prioritized list of roads. Multnomah County Transportation, here is your [list]—one or two dozen roads—that Multnomah County Department of Transportation is responsible for clearing first. And the purpose of that is to move emergency vehicles quickly throughout the region. Everybody with responsibility for roads, all the departments of transportation, is a co-signer on this document.

Q: *Does this plan identify places where bridges are going to drop?*

A: It can't predict what bridges are going to drop. But here's one that goes across the river, the Burnside Bridge. I believe that one is solid. We also know that Marquam, and the Fremont Bridge, are going to withstand. We know Interstate and Glen Jackson are going to stay up. We have a plan, but who knows?

Q: *Life is what happens when you're making other plans.*

A: Exactly. Here's 405 on this map. If one of these overpasses has dropped, whoever is responsible gets the cars, rubble, you name it, out of the way, so we can move equipment throughout the region. It's a huge piece of work. And we definitely rely on the private sector—they've got bigger equipment some-

times than the public sector does. . . [W]ith this plan we have a place to send them. . . . That's what the point of these emergency operations centers is, we can put those assets to good use very quickly.

Q: *How do you know, the half hour after an earthquake, what private sector resources are available?*

A: We have some information. City of Portland's done a real good job with a business database that they've kept. Or it may be as simple as, like Katrina, people just show up . . . and you put them to work. It happened in the flood here, in 1996. It would happen again. Governments have only so many assets. The community has far more assets. What we try to do is bring to the incident . . . command and control, to channel those resources to where they'll do the most good.

Q: *How much of our preparedness problem is unreinforced masonry?*

A: Unreinforced masonry is a terrible problem. My worst case scenario is a massive earthquake, 8 on up, at 10:30 in the morning on a weekday. Not only will some of the buildings just collapse, some of the ones that are left standing will shed their skins. Yes, it's a huge problem.

Q: *Is it worse here than other places?*

A: I don't know the comparison. I guess what I would compare it to is that we feel pretty proud of ourselves now, looking at the South and saying, 'How come they didn't spend money on the levees?' And maybe someday I'll say, 'How come we didn't spend money making sure that our bridges over the Willamette could withstand an earthquake?' The price tag is about the same, their levees and our bridges. So how come they didn't, and we aren't either?

Q: *And we're not going to spend that money.*

A: We're not. . . . The fact is that we don't have a yearly earthquake. There's no earthquake season here. We have winter. We have summer. But they have hurricane season. In the Midwest they have tornado season.

Q: *So we haven't reinforced our bridges. We haven't reinforced our masonry.*

A: And that price tag is huge. Just for the county, for our buildings. County Facilities went through and did a seismic analysis of all of our buildings. One of the reasons we're staying here, in this building [501 SE Hawthorne, the Multnomah County Building] is that it's solid. This building is old, but it was actually constructed well enough to withstand an earthquake . . .

Q: *So we haven't done much and won't do much about bridges and masonry buildings. What else haven't we done cuz we can't afford it?*

A: There's never an end to the list of things we could do.

ON REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

Tom Simpson: The lines between our counties and our jurisdictions are not only permeable, but to most people nonexistent. We have to ignore those lines in emergency management. Citizens, when they are looking for things, they don't care where they live. Citizens in this region think in terms of being regional citizens. They don't put it in that way, but they don't know where the boundaries are, nor do they care. They want to know, 'What's the answer to my question?' We within the system know exactly where the boundaries are. And if we respond, 'I'm sorry, you're in another county, I can't answer that question,' it's the wrong answer! The answer is, 'Let me get you in touch with a person who can solve your problem.'

. . . maybe someday I'll say, "How come we didn't spend more money making sure our bridges . . . could withstand an earthquake?"

Q: *Your dad worked on that?*

A: Yeah, he was the Chair of the original Metropolitan Planning Commission back in the '60s. [*Robert G. Simpson was Chair, 1967-70, of the Metropolitan Study Commission, a legislatively established and funded body that functioned from 1963 to 1971 and substantially transformed the structure of government in the Portland area. –ed.*] His job is unfinished, and always going on. I did my masters thesis on the provision of government services under a regional government—what could be provided regionally, and which services were needed to make it a reality. It came down to what I call the wholesale and the retail model. The wholesale services are, for example, providing regional training, equipment provisions, those kinds of things. Then, retail is where you put your fire equipment. But there was a great deal of agreement that the service side would be required of a regional entity. One of my great frustrations is the fact that Metro has, I believe, squandered some opportunities.

Q: *Like what?*

A: I just don't believe they have provided leadership, visionary leadership around what this region could become and how it could be governed better. . . . They have such a rich legacy, and this region has such a rich legacy of regional provision of services and regional thinking, that for them to just focus on picking up the garbage—it's like, time out here, guys. There are so many more regional issues that you should be talking about. . . . They should be getting people thinking as a region instead of governing in so many different pockets. They kept

Tom Simpson, Director of Emergency Management for Multnomah County.

getting beat back and they ended up with five or ten services that nobody is going to squawk about.

Q: *Tell me what individuals can do. I was intrigued by what you were saying at the Safety Fair at OMSI, that 80% of first responders in a disaster are untrained bystanders.*

A: Any citizen is a first responder. When those hurricanes blasted through, who were the first responders? The people who were left. They were the people helping clean up right afterward or helping neighbors get out of the water. So giving them a set of skills about how they can be of greatest use in an emergency is a huge piece. . . . What I try to do is find the natural systems, those places where people are already involved. We can work with those places to build preparedness. I would rather get useful information to those networks that are out there already.

When I came into this job there wasn't a lot being done on citizen preparedness. But the City of Gresham and the City of Portland already had existing programs in place, and people engaged in those programs. I have started trying to engage groups like Volunteers of America and churches about what they can do. Not what I can do…. What can you do for the people that live within a half a mile of your building? Do you have a kitchen with a backup generator, so that if the power goes out you can fire up a kitchen? Is your building reinforced? That's the kind of thing I am looking for. Can the community help individuals in the community? How do we empower existing organizations with this gospel of preparedness?

Q: *How would people respond to an emergency differently if they had heard from you?*

A: Well, some of them had the right instincts after Katrina. Some people had to stay, and they were cooking. They broke into stores for food and they got the barbecues going. They created this huge community on the fly, and they were cooking together and working together and protecting themselves together. I thought, that's the right attitude, that's what you need. You need citizens who are willing to do that for each other…. The ones who had the wrong instincts were the ones who—I always shake my head at the people who decide, 'I am just going to ride this one out.' NO!

Q: *Do three-day kits matter?*

A: In an emergency, experience has shown us within three days systems are typically back up and running. In a typical incident, your three day kit is going to take care of you—especially if you make it portable. If you have to shelter in place, you are okay. If you have to pick up and go, you can go to a shelter. Typically three days—and you can stretch it to four if you need to—will provide you enough stability until services are back on line. There are preparedness gaps with the home bound. They found that out during the Biscuit fire, in that valley by Cave Junction that they were trying to evacuate. Knock, knock, knock, open the door, hello, hospital bed. Did you know there was a hospital bed there? No! Nobody knew there was a hospital bed there. There's no requirement in our society to register hospital beds with the government. However, now I need to evacuate you in a hospital bed. . . . It turned out there were a lot of people who were being cared for at home, which is a really good way to give them services. They feel healthier at home, but when we try to evacuate people it becomes a bit of a challenge.

Q: *You said earlier that you guided the county through a shift from disaster to all-hazards orientation. What was that about?*

A: Well, you know I said there were waves, cycles. The wave after 9/11 was all about terrorism, so natural disasters fell off the planning radar. At the local level, a lot of emergency managers gave up their focus on natural hazards, which was good, but also bad because they didn't shift their orientation towards the new paradigm coming down with homeland security. Some of the paradigm shift was actually really good. It shook up the existing paradigm, which was left over from the Civil Defense era, like how to build an air raid shelter in your basement. We needed to get past that. There is still a lot of blowback wishing all this terrorism stuff would go away so we can get back to natural disaster. I've tried to shift the County's internal thinking towards doing both.

Q: *What could a terrorist do to us?*

A: The good news about Portland is that I don't know if any terrorists know that we're here. We don't have any targets of national significance. On the other hand, our relative obscurity is also our weakness, in that people can hide here if they want to…. We have to be aware that there are people out there that want to do us harm. When you think of terrorism you think of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaida, but frankly, if you look at home grown terrorists, the Timothy McVeighs, we've got some pretty juicy ones here at home.

Q: *What does FEMA do? What can we expect them to do for us before or after?*

A: Well, they are not a first response agency. The federal government is not a first response agency unless you have a huge federal installation sitting in your backyard, like an army base. We may have access to all those resources, but there is a certain order you have to go through to get that stuff. It goes to the President, who can deploy federal resources. In the South, FEMA had deployed resources. They had disaster medical assistance. They didn't have enough. In our case, I don't expect anything from FEMA right away. Outside of FEMA, we know what assets the federal government has, we know what Department of Defense assets we could use, we know the EPA has assets we can use. They may have trucks, they may have stockpiles, not something an average state can handle. So we are bringing in the federal assets and learning how to work with them, FEMA, the CDC, the federal government. Instead of saying how do we work with FEMA, I say, how do we work with the federal government? That's what it's about.

Q: *Where does the Red Cross fit in?*

A: In disaster response, they set up sheltering and feeding, and they can do it quickly. They have teams ready to go…. They do that really well and they know where their boundaries are. But outside that box, it becomes a little more problematic. They're fabulous to work with. But clearing debris? No.
I had never really worked closely with the Red Cross till our response to Katrina evacuees here in Portland. They are really an independent organization. They make decisions independent of anybody else, they implement those decisions, and you may not find out about them until they are implementing them. That was a challenge for me because I'm used to working with a multi-jurisdictional team of people who work closely together with a particular mandate. The Red Cross has awesome people—their heart's in the right place. Very professional. But very independent.

ON HEALTH FACILITIES

Tom Simpson: You know, Multnomah County just happens to have most of the region's hospitals. We have OHSU, we have Legacy, we have Emanuel, we have Good Samaritan. Washington county's got some, Clackamas County's got some, but we have the bulk of them. However, they work as a system, and they plan as a system. In fact, they erase jurisdictional and organizational boundaries when a big one hits. They take that limited asset and put it to use. We try to do that with all other regional assets, too.

You know, people think they ask simple questions. They don't. Like, "How many adult care facilities are there in the region?' Oh, you used the magic word, 'region.' As soon as I leave my county, I don't know anymore. They say, 'Doesn't the state do that?' Uh, y'know—No.

You talk about New Orleans, they had to evacuate hospitals. I encourage anyone who knows somebody who works in a hospital to just ask, what if the hospital you worked in had to be evacuated. How fast could that happen? Just watch their face. Holy moses! There are people there who are just touch and go. You don't just evacuate an ICU. But guess what, there are times when you have to. How are you going to do that?

Q: *Are we prepared?*

A: We are always preparing. It's not a state. You are never prepared, you are always preparing. You never can guess what is going to happen next. M